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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 001220

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NEW FRICTIONS BETWEEN UNIFIED BUDDHIST CHURCH OF VIETNAM AND GOVERNMENT

1. (U) On November 20, the Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau, the de facto overseas voice of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), issued a press release reporting that the police "physically assaulted" UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do and "tore his robes to pieces" in a "clash" on November 19. The police reportedly sought to prevent Do from presiding over a memorial ceremony for a Zen Buddhist master in an UBCV pagoda in HCMC. According the IBIB, during the clash, a crowd of bystanders gathered and protested police harassment of the UBCV monks and Vietnam's suppression of religious freedom.

2. (SBU) On November 21, we spoke by phone with a subordinate of Thich Quang Do about the incident. The contact confirmed that police attempted to block Do from traveling across town to the Giac Hoa pagoda with six UBCV acolytes. A shoving match between the six acolytes and plainclothes police ensued, in which Do's robes were slightly torn (it is unclear by whom). The contact said that a crowd of onlookers assembled during the 30-minute incident, slowing traffic and adding to the confusion. Police eventually allowed a taxi to take the group to the Gia Hoa pagoda, where Thich Quang Do presided over a four-hour ceremony.

The UBCV monk said that police warned UBCV monks from across southern Central Vietnam not to travel to HCMC for the ceremony.

Nonetheless, some 15 senior monks and nuns were among the nearly 100 religious figures from UBCV strongholds in southern Vietnam who attended, including Thich Thien Minh -- amnestied in February 2005. The contact reported heavy police surveillance outside and inside the Gia Hoa pagoda.

3. (SBU) Separately, political activist and Catholic Priest Father Nguyen Van Ly visited the UBCV's senior-most representative in Hue, Thich Thien Hanh on November 18. According to a message that Ly posted on a dissident website, Ly had no problems entering the pagoda and meeting with Hanh. However, when the UBCV monk escorted Ly to the exit, 10 police approached Hanh and order him not to leave. Following the visit, police orally informed Ly that they had increased administrative detention measures against him. Ly reportedly now must seek police permission before traveling anywhere beyond the neighborhood in which he lives. (Following his release from prison in February 2005, Ly has been living at the residence of the Hue Archbishop.) A UBCV contact told us that Thich Thien Hanh has been under "informal" pagoda arrest for the past two weeks following Hanh's "unauthorized" visit to HCMC in early November to meet with Thich Quang Do and Hanh's creation of a UBCV representative board for Thua Thien Hue province.

4. (SBU) As of COB November 21 in HCMC, there have been no reports of arrests of UBCV members. Landline and cell phone lines to UBCV pagodas and monks in HCMC were cut on Saturday, but restored on Monday.

5. (SBU) Comment: The confrontation between Thich Quang Do and police, although seemingly not as dramatic as the IBIB portrayed in its press release, is the latest in a series of recent incidents involving the UBCV and the government. The UBCV has stepped up its efforts to organize at the provincial level, creating "representative boards" in a number of provinces throughout southern and central Vietnam. And the UBCV and the irrepressible Thich Quang Do continue to call for the end to one-Party rule in Vietnam. For their part, senior monks of the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha have attacked the UBCV for "undermining national unity," and police reportedly have stepped up their harassment of the UBCV's newly designated regional representatives.

WINNICK